

FLAG FACTS AND TERMS

Infantry Flags:

According to regulations, each regiment carried two flags, called “**colors**” (note: the term “colors” could refer to one or both flags). The colors were made of silk and measured 6.5 feet tall by 6 feet wide. Each flag was attached by a sleeve to a **pike** (or staff) which measured 9 feet 10 inches in length, including the **finial**. Each flag had a yellow **fringe** and a **cord with tassels** made of intermixed blue and white silk.

The two flags carried by infantry regiments were called its “**stand of colors**” (although a stand could sometimes mean just one flag). Usually, a stand consisted of:

A **national color**, based on the red, white and blue federal flag, the “Stars and Stripes.” Stars, indicating the number of states in the Union, were painted in gold on the **canton**. Before 1863, national colors displayed 34 stars. After 1863, they bore 35 stars because **West Virginia** entered the Union. The **name of the regiment** appeared on the middle (fourth) red stripe. Regulations called for this designation to be embroidered in silver, but the silver tarnished, so in practice designations were painted in gold like the stars. The flag was fringed.

A **regimental color**, which featured a blue silk field decorated with the handpainted **arms of the United States**. Sometimes the **state’s coat-of-arms** was substituted or a flag might have both (one on each side). The name of the regiment appeared on a red scroll below the eagle. The flag was fringed.

Cavalry Flags:

Each regiment of cavalry carried a single silk “**standard**,” a much smaller version of the infantry flag. It measured two feet three inches high by two feet five inches wide. Standards were trimmed in yellow silk fringe and carried on **lances** which measured nine feet long, including the finial.

Since the cavalry did not fight together as a regiment, each company or troop within the regiment also carried a flag, called a “**guidon**” (pronounced “guy-don”). Because of their shape, they were called “**swallowtail**” **guidons**. Originally, cavalry guidons were divided horizontally, red over white, with the letters “U.S.” appearing in white on the red portion and the company letter in red on the white portion. In 1862, regulations were changed so that cavalry guidons were made like national flags, with stars and stripes.

Artillery Flags:

Artillery regiments had large silk flags similar to infantry flags. But, although there were no regulations to require it or dictate their size or design, individual batteries (similar to companies) also carried flags. Small silk flags similar to cavalry flags, they were usually swallowtail guidons.

Additional Flag Terms:

Arms: Refers to either the state or federal coat-of-arms. Michigan's coat-of-arms consists of an elk and moose surmounted by a bald eagle, the symbol of our nation. A central shield features the rising sun, a man standing on a peninsula in a lake, and the motto "**Tuebor**" ("We shall defend"). A scroll below the shield bears another motto, "**Si Quaeris Peninsulam Amoenam Circumspice**" (If you seek a pleasant peninsula, look about you").

The federal coat-of-arms features a bald eagle holding an olive branch in his right talon and a bundle of arrows in his left. A scroll bearing the motto "**E Pluribus Unum**" (From many, one) is in his beak. A shield emblazoned with red and white stripes is usually found on the eagle's breast, but is sometimes located beneath the eagle, who crouches above it.

Battle Honors: The names of major engagements in which a regiment had particularly distinguished itself. Honors were handpainted directly onto the flag, but only upon receiving official authorization to do so.

Canton: A quadrant of the flag. In common usage, this referred to the top hoist (inner) quadrant of the flag. It featured a blue field with stars representing the states in the union.

Ferrule: The metallic tip at the base of the staff, used to plant the flag in the ground or rest the flag in a sling worn around the neck.

Field: The principal area of a flag, prior to any embellishments or additions.

Finial: The decorative ornament found at the top of the staff. It was usually made of metal and usually took the form of a spear, spade or eagle.

Flank Markers: Small flags carried on long staffs at each end of an infantry regiment's line of battle to mark the flanks.

Fly: The length of the flag measured from the sleeve to the free edge. It also refers to the outer half of the flag.

Fringe: Applied to the free edges of the flag, the fringe decorated the flag and weighted the light edges of the silk so that it would fly properly when unfurled.

Hoist: The height of the flag measured along the staff edge. It is also understood to refer to the half of the flag nearest the staff.

Obverse: View of the flag when the staff is on the viewer's left (the front).

Reverse: View of the flag when the staff is on the viewer's right (the back).

Sleeve: The part of the flag, usually reinforced with muslin and doubled over, through which the flag was slipped. The flag was then nailed through the sleeve to the staff.

Staff: The wooden pole to which the flag is attached. Technically, infantry staffs were called "**pikes**" while cavalry flags were called "**lances**."

What Is Actually Found in the Michigan Collection:

- Although most flags are silk, a few were made of cotton or wool bunting.
- Stars and the regimental designation were sometimes embroidered in white silk floss rather than painted in gold. This was particularly true of expensive flags custom ordered from Tiffany's of New York.
- Many infantry regimental flags included the Michigan coat-of-arms as well as the federal arms. On a few flags, these designs were embroidered rather than painted.
- Although regulations did not call for them, many flags bear mottoes, particularly the regiment's original presentation flags.
- Most regimental designations include the letters "**Vol**" for Volunteer." Michigan regiments were very proud that they fought as volunteers, not as conscripts.
- Later in the war, some flags bore regimental designations with the letters "**V.V.**" or "**Vet. Vol.**" This referred to "Veteran Volunteer." It indicated a regiment which had completed its original three-year enlistment and agreed to reenlist or "**veteranize**." If enough men agreed to reenlist, the regiment kept its original organization intact and

was referred to as a “veteran” regiment. This was a point of great pride. If not enough reenlisted, the regiment was broken up and veterans were sent to other regiments.

- Fringes are mostly yellow silk floss, but some were made of twisted gold-colored wire, called “gold bullion.” This is another hallmark of a “Tiffany” flag.
- None of Michigan’s cavalry guidons followed regulations and some feature crossed appliquéd sabers--not mentioned in regulations at all!
- Although all of Michigan’s regimental flags were commercially made and sewed on machines--not handstitched--some flags were decorated by hand. In a few, the stars, coats-of arms, regimental name and/or mottoes, were appliquéd or embroidered by hand. In one case, sequins were used to spell out words.
- The ferrule is missing from the base of virtually every flag because, by 1910, the staffs had been cut down to fit into the capitol’s rotunda display cases.
- Although regulations were generally followed, so many variations appear that no two flags are identical.

Other Military Terms:

Regiment: A regiment consisted of approximately 1,000 men and officers, commanded by a colonel.

Company: Each regiment was made up of ten **companies** of approximately 100 men each. Each company was commanded by a captain. One company was designated the “**color company**” and was charged with the responsibility--and honor--of carrying and defending the flags in battle.

Battalion: A unit of troops consisting of between two and nine companies.

Brigade: Two or more regiments were grouped into a brigade, commanded by a brigadier general or a senior colonel. The “average” Civil War brigade consisted of four to eight regiments.

Division: A formation consisting of two or more (usually three) brigades, commanded by a major or brigadier general.

Corps: A formation consisting of two or more (usually three) divisions, commanded by a major general.

Army: A formation consisting of at least two corps.

Battery: The usual name for a company of artillery.

Other Flag Facts:

- There are 163 Civil War battle flags in the state's collection. Most are regimental battle flags, but some are flank markers or designating flags (flags used to identify corps and brigades). In addition to Civil War flags, there are also 70 flags from two other wars: the Spanish-American War and World War I.
- Most of the Civil War flags were presented to the state on July 4, 1866 in Detroit by the returned Michigan regiments. Governor Crapo received the flags on the behalf of the state and pledged that they would be "preserved forever."
- Not all regimental battle flags were returned: others survive in museums and private collections. The whereabouts of others is unknown.
- Each regiment carried more than one stand of colors during the war, as flags had to be replaced as they became too tattered. The number of flags a regiment carried depended on its length of service and the amount of action it saw. There is no accurate count of the actual number of flags carried by Michigan regiments during the war.
- The highest mortality rates of the war, both North and South, were suffered by those who carried or defended flags in battle.
- A regiment whose flag was captured by the enemy suffered great disgrace. Conversely, great honor followed the capture of enemy flags. The Congressional Medal of Honor was instituted during the Civil War to honor acts of extraordinary bravery. During the war, it was almost exclusively awarded for the capture of rebel flags.
- After the war, the Michigan State Capitol was built--in part--as a place to preserve and display the state's collection of Civil War battle flags. The flags were intended to stand as "mute testimony" to Michigan's sacrifices during the war--and to preserve the memory of its role in preserving the Union and abolishing slavery.